

# City of Alexandria, Virginia

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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** APRIL 10, 2015

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**THROUGH:** MARK B. JINKS, ACTING CITY MANAGER *m*

**FROM:** MORGAN ROUTH, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET *MR*

**SUBJECT:** BUDGET MEMO 18: OPTIONS TO STAFF ENGINE 210

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This memorandum responds to a request from City Council at the Safe, Secure & Just Focus Area Worksession to provide a range of options to staff a fire engine at Station 210 as soon as feasible.

### Staff Recommendations

The Fire Department's (AFD) plan has been to add the engine at Station 210 which requires 12 personnel by transitioning to the dual-role staffing model. At the October City Council briefing, AFD indicated that with overhires, it was possible that Station 210 could be staffed by the end of 2015. However given its experience with greater than expected fire department retirements and slower than originally projected medic conversion to the dual firefighter/medic role position, AFD now believes that at the *existing budget resource level*, staffing an engine at Station 210 will take at a minimum four to five years. This will require no additional positions over the long-term, but as noted in the briefing to City Council in October 2014, is now expected to take several more years to achieve.

If sufficient overhires were authorized as discussed further in this memorandum, AFD estimates that an engine could be staffed by approximately December 2016. The FY 2016 proposed budget contains no funding for overhires or additional staffing. If City Council wishes to accelerate this process via overhires, staff recommends adding \$0.9 million to the FY 2016 Fire Department budget to hire up to 20 additional personnel as "overhires" (i.e. an authorization to temporarily hire above authorized strength), with the plan to begin recruitment now and the goal of starting a new recruit class in early CY 2016.

Other options considered but not recommended for Station 210 staffing include staffing an additional engine on overtime, reducing staffing on some engines from four to three per engine, contracting with another jurisdiction, or hiring back retirees. The reasons for not recommending

these options are contained within this memorandum.

Adding \$0.9 million to the AFD FY 2016 budget would provide partial-year funding to hire up to 20 additional personnel in FY 2016. This would enable the Fire Department to staff an engine at Station 210 sooner than the current plan, but it would occur in December 2016 at the soonest due to the amount of time (up to 21 months) required to recruit and hire (9 months) and train (6 months in fire recruit school and 4 to 6 months of on-the-job training) the firefighters and have a significant fiscal impact in future years. The future cost and timing would depend on how the additional staff is utilized. There are a variety of options summarized in this memorandum.

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### **Options Considered to Staff an Engine at Fire Station 210 in FY 2016**

#### **A. Transfer an existing engine and staff to Station 210 temporarily (no cost)**

Transferring an existing engine to Station 210 has the following advantages:

- 1) There is no cost impact of moving an engine from one location to another.
- 2) It allows the Chief's long-term plan of dual-role providers to continue without adding positions.
- 3) The decision to move an engine to Station 210 could be made at any time and occur very quickly.

There are major disadvantages with this option:

- 1) With the increased call volume and difficulties in traversing the City, moving an existing engine would have a negative effect on response times in that engine's current surrounding community regardless of which engine is transferred.
- 2) As evidenced by last year's proposal to move Station 204's engine to station 210 which was rejected by City Council, moving an engine out of a station would not be seen as acceptable by the portion of the community now served by that engine.

#### **B. Staff an engine at Station 210 using a combination of overtime and staffing changes (cost varies)**

Staffing an engine at Station 210 could occur with a combination of any number of the following staffing changes:

- 1) Taking some or all engine companies down to three staff per engine instead of the industry desired standard and regional practice of four staff per engine.
- 2) Using overtime to staff the engine
- 3) Contracting with a neighboring jurisdiction
- 4) Hiring back retirees or part time employees

Staff does not recommend any of these options for a number of reasons:

- 1) The industry desired standard and regional practice for staffing a fire engine envisions four personnel per engine. Taking personnel off existing four-person engines and turning them to three -person engines is less safe and inconsistent with recent City efforts and further plans to upgrade to four person engine staffing. The City has spent considerable resources towards

achieving four-person engines for all engines and this would move AFD in the opposite direction.

- 2) Using overtime is not practical from an employee health & safety perspective, even for a short period of time. There are potential and indeterminable costs that may occur related to overtime utilization, worker's compensation claims and increased turnover from employee fatigue. Because overtime would cause a substantial number of different staff to be utilized, each shift's team members would consistently vary, potentially eroding the teamwork effectiveness of an engine at Station 210.
- 3) The ability of other jurisdictions or retirees to staff an engine is not viable. The staff is not available in partner jurisdictions to staff Engine 210 and retirees would need to pass all the medical and training certifications again in order to serve which may not be possible or prudent in all cases.

Additionally, due to the length of time required to recruit, hire, train and certify new employees to operate on fire engines, additional staffing levels or personnel authorized in the FY 2016 budget would not allow the station to be staffed before December 2016 and possibly could take longer.

**Staff Recommendation on Staffing an Engine at Station 210 in FY 2016**

The FY 2016 budget does not include funding for overhires that provide higher staffing levels while the transition to the dual-role service model continues. Adding overhires to the Department also gives AFD capacity to cross train personnel without the use of overtime while attempting to maintain full staffing and staffing an engine at Station 210. Authorizing 20 overhire positions would require \$866,000 in FY 2016 and additional amounts if authorized to recur annually (see table below) to staff an engine at Station 210 while continuing work on the longer-term strategy of dual-role transition. If City Council were to include this amount in the FY 2016 budget, AFD could use the overhires and attempt to staff an engine at Station 210 no earlier than December 2016 due to the lead time described earlier in this memorandum for recruitment, hiring, fire recruit school and on-the-job training.

It should be noted that to staff an engine using overhires carries the risk of some increased overtime usage which is not included in these figures. Since overhires are positions in excess of the authorized count, as employees leave the Department, the number of overhires gradually decreases. Thus, if AFD were to staff an engine at Station 210 with overhires, and that number were to decrease due to normal attrition, the engine may require additional overtime or would need to be taken out of service temporarily. Overhire capacity to staff an engine at Station 210 depends on attrition of existing employees and ongoing staffing needs for existing engines. AFD will make every reasonable attempt to staff an engine at Station 210, but cannot guarantee staffing one using overhires. Additionally, overhire funding would be required for a number of years, at least until the dual-role transition is far enough along to support staffing an engine with permanent staffing. The figures listed below are likely a worst case cost for FY 2018, FY 2019 and FY 2020.

	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020
20 overhire positions	\$865,980	\$1,466,557	\$1,510,553	\$1,555,870	\$1,602,546

The Fire Department staff is looking at two other alternatives that could potentially speed up the timing of this process. The Department is about to open an advertisement for new hires. These hires are scheduled to begin recruit school in February 2016 (which would include the overhires), however the Department will examine the pool of candidates to see if there are candidates who already have the necessary certifications that Alexandria teaches in recruit school. If so, these candidates could be hired and put through a modified recruit school earlier than most candidates which would result in an earlier staffing increase. This would allow the staffing of Engine 210 sooner than December 2016. Specific dates on timing and use of these providers will not be known until applications are reviewed, certifications are examined, and initial background checks begin. It is possible that there will not be enough of these candidates in the applicant pool to staff Engine 210, so it is premature to give a timeline for this scenario. The Department will have a better idea of potential early hires and a specific plan for them in June.

Another option staff is pursuing is a partnership with the Arlington County Fire Department to hold joint recruit schools. In this scenario, Arlington and Alexandria new hires would train together and both jurisdictions would share in the cost of supplies, materials, classroom and training space and instructors. The benefit to this agreement is that rather than running one recruit school a year, Alexandria could now run two schools per year, potentially allowing a recruit school earlier than February 2016. This could provide additional trained firefighters to be utilized for staffing before December 2016. However, staff continues to work out the logistics on this proposal but there is no firm agreement in place at this point. This limits the staff's ability to provide concrete answers to feasibility and timing.

Both scenarios would still require overhires and the initial year funding identified in the previous table.

### **Other Questions and Information for Consideration**

**Q: How many of our authorized medic positions do we need to cross-over to firefighter positions before we can fully staff Engine 210?**

A: The Department would need a minimum of 45 medic positions to become cross-trained (dual-role) personnel to staff an engine at Station 210 on an ongoing basis without the need for excess overtime funds.

**Q: Are there other options to speed up the medic transition?**

A: While the medics already receive a 10% pay increase through the newly expanded career ladder for becoming dual-role certified, this amount is not reflected in their take-home they net pay since the different Firefighter schedule has a lower amount of FLSA overtime each pay period. As a result, Medics who transition to dual-role will now receive another 10% "Transition Pay" for a total of 20% pay increase. If the additional 10% transition pay is not effective in incentivizing medic transition, City staff will explore other options for the medics to transition into this new system.

**Q: Can a SAFER grant be used to increase dual-role firefighters given that within the current structure there are single role medics?**

A: Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER) grants are Federal grants used to help increase authorized position counts. SAFER is not recommended since it requires the Department to increase its authorized position count for the duration of the grant which is not necessary using the dual-role service model as previously discussed.

However the earliest a grant application could be submitted (assuming the timelines are the same next year) would be March 2016. This means that if awarded, it would push back the availability of positions for Station 210 to December 2017 at the earliest. Also worth noting, this proposal would still require approximately \$450,000 of City funding to accept the SAFER grant due to costs that the grant would not cover in the first two years. There is also a three year maintenance of staffing effort requirement since the SAFER grants are aimed at creating higher levels of fire and emergency response staffing levels.

**Q: Is it true that the City does not have an engine for Station 210?**

A: As part of the Fire Department fleet plan, in 2013 the City purchased enough engines to replace all of the existing engines plus an additional engine for Station 210. Currently that engine is being used for training and as a backup for other engines that need to come out of service for routine maintenance or repairs. Additional engines for this purpose are on order. As such, an engine is available for Station 210 at such time it can be staffed. In sum, Station 210 has an engine, just no staff assigned to it.

CC: Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager  
Robert Dubé, Fire Chief

